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ROBERT CAVALIER DE LA SALLE

OF

ROUEN.

by

Gabriel Gravier.

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ROBERT CAVALIER DE LA SALLE OF ROUEN

At twenty-three, La Salle entered upon his career. From that day until his death, which took place three years after that of Corneille, his life is a poem. The coldest writer and the most methodical must, as M. Gayrre remarks, necessarily give to his history the form of romance. One might say that he created the material for the poems of his great compatriot. For two centuries his enemies alone have had liberty of speech; to-day La Salle is allowed to speak for himself. Let us follow his career, but rapidly, as the necessities of our space require.

Jean, Cavalier's elder brother, a priest and doctor of the faculty of Paris, was in Canada. That circumstance, probably, had a large influence upon his decision. Robert reached Montreal in 1666. The south part of the isle was frequently ravaged by the Iroquois, and the husbandman was compelled to carry on the labors of the field with weapons in his hands. An advanced post was necessary, near the falls of Saint Louis, in the path of the savages, to give the alarm and to sustain the first attack. The commander of the post must be gifted with the highest courage and prudence. M. de Queylus, superior of the seminary of Villemarie, gave La Salle this very perilous post. The young man from Rouen founded a village, which he called by the name of St. Sulpice, but which soon after took that of La Chine, which it bears to this day. Gradually he made grants, put the land under cultivation, built dwellings and enhanced the value of his fine domain, which was, by the act of January 11, 1669, erected into a *fief noble*, of which he was suzerain. There was nothing to hinder a tranquil life, and with the skill which was never wanting in him, he could enrich himself by traffic with the Iroquois. But it was the useless, obscure existence of a country gentleman, the golden mediocrity of the poet. It had nothing in common with his dreams. What was necessary to his adventurous spirit was to enlarge the boundaries of the world, to open to our commerce a new way to the mysterious countries of the extreme Orient.

He understood the Iroquois and seven or eight dialects, had studied the narratives of explorers, made short voyages into the neighboring country and had conceived the plan of new discoveries. Giovanni and Sebastian Cabot, Christopher Columbus, Jacques Cartier, the Recollets, Jean Nicolet, the Jesuits, and others besides, had dreamed of China. They had sought it by the Isthmus of Panama, by Davis Straits and Hudson's Bay, by the St. Lawrence and the great lakes, and had sought in vain.

La Salle had been informed, during the winter of 1668-69, by the Iroquois Esonnontouans, that a great river had its source in the country

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of the Five Nations, and flowed towards the sea, and that in following its course in eight months he would arrive at its mouth. He believed it was the passage to China so much desired. He went to see Remy de Courcelles, the governor general, and Ealon, the Intendant, communicated to them his enthusiasm, and obtained authority to make the discovery at his own cost.

To procure boats, arms, provisions, rowers and a surgeon, he sold all his goods, and as they say burned his ships. He thus put all that he possessed into a very uncertain enterprise, but whose success would bring great honor to his country, and open an immense horizon to the commerce of France. He was then twenty-six years old, and already he had attained to the height of one of the heroes of Plutarch.

In the meantime the Sulpicians proposed an expedition into the west. They had received authority, but it was on condition that they should join Cavalier de la Salle. That would have made the affair neither one thing nor another. Dollier de Casson and Brehant de Galinée sought the conversion of souls, Cavalier sought a passage to China, and now all accepted this combination.

They started from Saint Sulpice on the 6th of July, 1669. The expedition was composed of twenty-two French and seven boats of Iroquois Esoumontouans. They ascended together on Lake Ontario to the village Asonnontouan and to Eenaouata on Lake Erie. There they separated. The Sulpicians went to the north, and La Salle to the south. About six or seven leagues below Lake Erie he came to the river Ohio, and descended to the falls of St Louis. Compelled to take to the land, he followed a rising ground. Some savages told him that the river lost itself far away in that vast flat land, and was reunited in a single bed. As the labor was great, the twenty-three or twenty-four men who accompanied him deserted in a single night. He thus found himself alone, 400 leagues from the French habitations, to which he returned, living by the chase, or upon what the savages gave him, sleeping beneath the beautiful stars or in the wigwam of some Indian.

In the spring of 1670 he was at Ottawa. In 1672 he resumed a second time his way to the Mississippi, but instead of descending the Ohio, he went by the great lakes, discovered the Illinois, descended it to the 39th degree, entered into another great river, which flowed from the northwest to the southeast, and followed it to the 36th degree of latitude, where he stopped for want of sufficient force, but was sure that this river flowed into the Gulf of Mexico.

Note here two most important points. It is upon the 39th parallel

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that the Illinois empties into the Mississippi, and at that place the Mississippi flows from the northwest to the southeast. It was then the Mississippi which he had found. Moreover, he could not, having embarked upon the Illinois, and descended to the 36th degree save by the Mississippi.

It is objected that the author of the Relation is not friendly to the Jesuits. Is that a reason to be considered? Cannot one be a man of honor without loving the Jesuits? M. Margry believes that the Abbe Renaudot is the author of this memoir. The Jesuits reply that it cannot be the Abbe Renaudot, and that, if it were he, the honor would be impaired. Between M. Pierre Margry, who has glanced over these articles, and the author, to whom I allude, my choice is made. I believe that it is the Abbe Renaudot, and I persist in regarding this savant as worthy of respect. Why do they say nothing of Louis Joliet, who in his map indicated the Ohio and the Illinois as the routes taken by La Salle to reach Mexico?

In 1673 the Iroquois, the Ottawas and the English threatened our commerce. The Count de Frontenac resolved to ascend Lake Ontario, as M. de Courcelles had done in 1672. He charged the Jesuit missionaries and Cavalier de la Salle to visit the Five Nations of the Iroquois, and to induce them to send representatives to Quinte on Lake Ontario. At the moment of starting, the seat of the conference was changed from Quinte to Cataracoui at the mouth of the St. Lawrence. Gifted above all with diplomatic skill, the Cavalier de la Salle persuaded seventeen nations to be represented at Cataracoui. The representatives, in token of their confidence, came with their wives and children. Already the savages knew Cavalier de la Salle well enough to be sure that he was incapable of deceiving them. The dignity, the grand manners, the skilled diplomacy of Count de Frontenac insured entire success. He obtained from the Iroquois all that he desired. For awhile these fierce savages would have labored at the fort which was to hold them in check.

In the autumn of 1674, Cavalier de la Salle came to France and presented at court his petitions and plans. The King gave him letters of nobility, the grant of Fort Frontenac, and an immense territory on Lake Ontario. It was the record of the great services he had already rendered the colony.

At the moment, when Cavalier de la Salle demanded Fort Frontenac, the government hesitated even about the preservation of the Fort. The Governor proved that, with a single ship, which was in pro-

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cess of construction, and a Fort upon the Niagara, we would be masters upon the great lakes, and that the commerce of the North would come to the French settlements instead of going to the English. The Jesuits, whose plans he had counteracted, insinuated a thousand reasons on the other side. La Salle gained his cause. Fort Frontenac was the point of attack in the chain of Forts which La Salle would construct in the vallies of the Illinois and the Mississippi, the bulwark of our power in the West.

The grant of Fort Frontenac gave La Salle a right of lordship over the isles and neighboring forests, and over a strip of territory four leagues in length and a half league broad. He was the commander of the garrison, the founder of the mission, the patron of the church, and the sovereign of one of the finest domains in Canada.

Seeing him thus the favorite of fortune, his family came largely to his help. It would seem from the family papers which M. Mario de la Quesnerie has kindly communicated to me, that they advanced to him not less than from 500,000 to 600,000 livres, or from 2,000,000 to 2,400,000 francs.

If La Salle had desired simply to increase his wealth, he would have been on the high road to it, for he could have put his hand upon the best part of the traffic of Canada, and thus with little trouble made for himself 25,000 livres of income. But commercial profits were for him a means, not an end.

No sooner was he possessed of his lordship than he rebuilt in stone the wooden fort of Count de Frontenac, having cleared the allotment, made villages both for the French and the savages, constructed boats, provided rowers, opened a school, common one for the French and Iroquois' children, and in the midst of all these duties, he studied the course of the Mississippi.

Fort Frontenac was surrounded by enemies, Hurons and Iroquois? No, Frenchmen! Louis Hennepin and Zenobe Membre were advised of the snares spread around Cavalier de la Salle. Would they choose to raise even a corner of the veil the enemy is so powerful? At any rate the ray of light, which penetrates between their fingers, permits us to distinguish the group who were lurking in the darkness, and we could put a name upon each of the shadows who prowled around the fort.

La Salle baffled all their manoeuvres with marvellous dexterity. There was one, however, of whom he had no suspicion, and who nearly put an end to his plans and his life. Nicholas Perrot, the traveller,

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attempted to poison him. La Salle has declared in a letter that the Jesuits were innocent of the crime of their protege. They were his enemies, and therefore he the more believed he should defend them when accused of such a crime.

At the end of 1677, La Salle, having gone to France, reduced to nothing the calumnies spread against him, and obtained authority to discover at his own cost the mouth of the Mississippi. He returned to Quebec the 15th of September, 1678, with thirty craftsmen and the brave Henry de Conty.

As soon as he arrived he sent men forward to trade and to prepare the ground. Others ascended Cayuga Creek, beyond Niagara Falls, to build a fort, and the first vessel which should navigate the great lakes. All this was not accomplished without great difficulties. The Iroquois were at work in an underhand way; a man named Deslauriers, recommended to La Salle by the Jesuits, urged the men to desert, others proclaimed that the enterprise was a folly, and almost succeeded in seizing whatever La Salle possessed at Quebec and Montreal. He made reply to all by departing for Niagara, whence he had but just returned on foot, in the snow, almost without food, and with a dog for his only companion.

Arriving at Fort Conty, he completed the armament of the vessel, and, contrary to all expectation, he entered and crossed Lake Erie, the Straits of Detroit and Lake Huron, and, on the 27th of August, arrived at Michillimachinac.

The influences opposed to him at Quebec, Montreal, Frontenac and Conty, were felt also at Michillimachinac. The men sent to trade deserted while carrying the goods of La Salle. He sent the vessel back to Conty loaded with merchandise, and the vessel was plundered and destroyed by those in charge.

La Salle embarked on Lake Michigan or Illinois. There were fourteen men and four boats. After a voyage of great hardship he arrived November 1st at the small river Miami, where he built a new fort in order to connect that of Conty with those which he had planned upon the Illinois. The 3d of December, the whole party being reunited, sixty-three men, they embarked upon the Miami, passed the Kankakee or Divine, (the nom de guerre of Madame de Frontenac), arrived at the Illinois, and stopped for a while at the small lake Peoria, where were camped 4,000 Illinois, with whom they made an alliance. Upon this lake he raised a new fort, Crève-cœur (a name of deep signification), and began the construction of a vessel in which to descend to the Gulf of Mexico.

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On the night of his arrival he was denounced to the Illinois Indians as a friend of the Iroquois; that is to say, as a dangerous enemy, whom it was needful to slay. The men were seized with a panic, and some deserted, after having put into his saucepan a heavy dose of poison. They escaped by means of some antidote, says Conty, which had been given him by his friends in France.

According to Zenobe Membre, the deserters had been corrupted at Michillimachinac. Conty, Hennepin, and the same P. Membre accuse the French to the Illinois with having denounced La Salle. The documents recently published by M. Margry are still more explicit. La Salle foresaw an end to his enterprise, but the idea of retreating even partially was not to be thought of. He sent Michel Accau du Gay, called Picard, and Hennepin, the monk, to explore the sources of the Mississippi. Ten days afterward, March 4th, 1680, he went with four Frenchmen, and Nika, his faithful chaouanon, in a most rigorous winter, over deep snows in which they sunk to their knees, to seek at Frontenac rigging, furniture, and provisions which he needed in order to continue the expedition.

On returning at Fort Conty, he learned of the loss of the vessel which he had sent to Michillimachinac, and of a vessel from France, on which he had 2,200 livres. But this was not all. Of twenty-two men whom he had engaged in France, eighteen were detained by his enemy, the Intendant, Duchesneau, and upon news of his death four were sent out anew; still more, his men had deserted with his goods and his boats. In the meantime the force of Conty had dispersed, forts Crêvecœur and Niagara were laid waste, and the magazine at Michillimachinac had been plundered. It seemed, to use his own expression, that all Canada had conspired against his undertaking.

Who in his place would not have owned himself vanquished? Who would not have renounced so dangerous an enterprise, in order to enjoy calmly at Frontenac the pleasures of a noble position? La Salle did not even think of pleasure. He hastened to Montreal, arranged matters with his creditors, who made him new advances, arrested a party of his deserters, and started on his way with twenty-five men, workmen and soldiers, by the Humber, Lake Simcoe, the Severn, Lake Huron, and rested five days at Michillimachinac in order to obtain provisions. He left again with twelve men, revisited the ruins of the Fort Miama, and passed on to the Illinois. The seventeen villages which he had seen upon this great river, his Fort Crêvecœur, his vessel, all were in ruins. The whole shore, even to the Mississippi, presented a fright-

tul spectacle. The Iroquois had burned the villages, disinterred the dead, killed and eaten the living. The dogs, wolves and ravens even now fed upon the remains.

— Upon a tree on the banks of the Mississippi, he made a representation of himself, carrying a pipe of peace, and he left a letter for Conty. After incredible fatigue, he reached Fort Miami, and made it his winter quarters. He studied the situation anew.

The skillful intrigues had placed across his path the terrible Iroquois. All that he had done would be without practical result; at least he would hardly shut out this savage horror from the west. He remembered, however, that a commercial and military centre was necessary between the basins of the St. Lawrence and the Mississippi. Fort St. Louis, which he built upon Starved Rock, and the rich prairies of Illinois, seemed to him to be equally fitted for the necessities of war or the needs of commerce. His plan conceived, he began immediately to execute it, that is to say, he plunged into diplomacy without limit. He visited all the neighboring tribes, induced them to make peace and to settle around Fort St. Louis, under the protection of the King of France, in order that they might live, calm and happy in the abundance which Europe would supply, without fear of the Iroquois.

What speeches, what subtleties, what compliments! It is necessary to see these papers published by M. Margry. His efforts were crowned with success. He could see, before leaving Canada, around Fort St. Louis, the villages of twelve nations who recognized him as father of the King of France. As Lord of the country, by virtue of his letters patent, he granted concessions of land to the French. It is well understood that this great work brought him the detractions of all his enemies, beginning with the aged La Barre, the unworthy successor of Count Frontenac. With the culmination of coldness, came the movement to complete the discovery. La Salle returned once more to Frontenac, obtained credit for fresh advances, made his deposition, took with him Conty, the Recollect, Zenobe Membre, Jaques Metairie, notary of Fort Frontenac, twenty French, eighteen Abenakis or Mahingins, who carried with them ten women and three children, and started on his route. The 6th of February he arrived at the Mississippi, on the 12th he embarked upon the stream; March 14th, at the Arkansas, he planted the cross and arms of France; April 7th, he arrived at the mouth of the stream, and on the 9th, in the name of the King, he formally took possession of Louisiana. At the same time he traversed fifteen hundred leagues of desert, not having any provisions, except the product of the chase,

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having the compass for his guide. This discovery is the most important of the age, but we shall see how General de la Barre viewed it.

The intention of La Salle was to build a fort at the mouth of the Mississippi, but the lack of provisions forced him to adjourn his project to the following year. He retook, therefore, his route for Canada. At his coming all the tribes on the border of the river had given him a good reception; at his return, many desired to slay him. To what is it necessary to refer this fickleness of Indian character? Upon arriving at Fort Prudhomme, which he had constructed with the Chickasaws, he suddenly fell sick; and when, after being confined to his bed forty days, he returned to Illinois, it was not to be glorified, as he deserved, but to be persecuted. La Barre, who was only a puppet in the hands of his managers, denied boldly, not only the result of the discovery, but the discovery itself. Yet he did not rest with this. He authorized not only the pillage of the canoes of La Salle, but even his murder, while P. Allouez blessed the bullets of his deserters, assuring them that they might break (pierce) the head of the honest and valiant Conty. Against all law, La Barre arrested the men whom La Salle sent to seek, in Canada, the merchandise and munitions of which he had need. He refused to send to Fort Frontenac the soldiers that were asked for. In fine, he confiscated the Forts of Frontenac and St. Louis, compromised the results of the discovery, ruined Cavalier de La Salle and those associated with him in the enterprise.

La Salle returned to France, went to find Seignelay, convinced him of the foolishness of La Barre, who was immediately recalled, proposed to return by sea to the mouth of the Mississippi, and to capture the mines of Santa Barbara. The reports and memoirs furnished by Cavalier La Salle, both on his own discoveries and his projects, carried conviction into the mind of Minister Seingelay. In accordance with his request, July 24th, 1684, he set sail for the Gulf of Mexico. This fleet was composed of four ships, and was commanded by Le Gallois de Beaujeu, Captain of the Line. Beaujeu left with the conviction, we may say, with the hope of failure, as one may see in his correspondence with Cabart de Villermont. "The devotion of Madame de Beaujeu to the Jesuits" was suspected by La Salle. The Minister warned Beaujeu, that, by this "difficully he would fail of success in the enterprise of La Salle." La Salle was suspicious of Beaujeu. This Captain, who believed himself to be the ablest Captain of the French marine, passed, without recognizing, the mouths of the Mississippi. This man who always spoke of his own impeccability,

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forgetting his sojourn for nine months at the Tower of Rochelle, and his cassation, refused to comply with the demand of La Salle, who told him that he had passed their destination. But I do not desire to accuse him of the loss of the fly-boat *Aimable*, for which the Chevalier Aigron was imprisoned upon his return to France, but I am not able to repress the remark, that he did all that was necessary to defeat the enterprise, in order to justify his prejudices against La Salle. It suffices to say, that he debarked La Salle in the Bay of Matagorda, instead of landing him at the mouth of the Mississippi, that he gave him cannon without balls, because to obtain the balls which were intended for the expedition, it would be necessary to derange the storage.

His jealousy survived La Salle. When Le Moyne and Iberville were sent to find the mouths of the Mississippi, which they discovered by the indications of La Salle, Beaujeu did not cease to predict failure, and after success, to depreciate the value of its utility.

La Salle, abandoned by his companions, constructed forts, made attempt on attempt to reach the Mississippi by land. One should read in the Journal of Joutel of Rouen, the accounts of his prodigious efforts. He was about to succeed, when he was assassinated at the corner of a forest, March 19, 1687. He was forty-three years and four months old, and it was twenty years since he entered into our colonial domain.

Let us recapitulate the acts of the discoverer. He explored North America, north and south; he established a chain of forts from the entrance of Lake Ontario to the mouths of the Mississippi; he inaugurated navigation on the Great Lakes, by the discovery of the Ohio, the Wabash, the Illinois and the Mississippi; he opened the commerce with the Gulf of Mexico; by his colonies of Frontenac and of Illinois, he fortified us against the English; by his point against the Spanish mines, he showed us the possibility, the necessity of conquering Texas. It is with much reason that the Americans have placed his great name upon the map of Texas and of Illinois; it is with reason that they have placed his portrait in the Capitol at Washington; it is assuredly a wrong that his native city has done nothing to honor his memory.

GABRIEL GRAVIER,
*Honorary President, and General Secretary
of the Normand Geographical Society.*

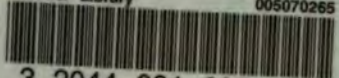
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